



ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE: STUCK IN THE WEEDS

June 2021

HUMANITARIAN HORIZONS PRACTICE PAPER SERIES

HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Humanitarian Advisory Group would like to thank the people who contributed to writing this paper, in particular Meg Sattler who contributed as an independent AAP expert, and brought her brilliant mind and writing skills to the thorny issue of AAP. We are also very grateful to the experts that provided peer review: Jon Bugge, Steve Goudswaard and Andrew Nzimbi.

Graphic Design: Jean Watson

Humanitarian Editor: Eleanor Davey

Copyeditor: Campbell Aitken

Cover photo: Blue wooden boat hidden in reed plants on a lake shore. Stayman / Shutterstock.

About us

Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that can positively contribute to excellence in humanitarian practice.

About the research program

This research is part of Humanitarian Advisory Group's three-year Humanitarian Horizons Research Programme, aiming to inform and elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. With funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Australian Government, Humanitarian Horizons supports excellence in humanitarian action by influencing policy and practice in the region and globally.

Certified



Humanitarian Advisory Group is BCorp certified. This little logo means we work hard to ensure that our business is a force for good. We have chosen to hold ourselves accountable to the highest social, environmental and ethical standards, setting ourselves apart from business as usual.



HAG is also Social Traders certified. Social Traders work to connect business and government to social enterprises to increase ethical procurement and create positive community outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

We would be hard pressed to find a topic more pervasive in global humanitarian speak than accountability to affected people (AAP), its unofficial motto ‘putting people at the centre’ the catch-cry of almost every humanitarian reform process, discussion and publication.

Self-reports indicate there is no shortage of practical effort.¹ But the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Alliance has shown that there is a ‘difference between what we see in policy and what takes place in practice.’ In truth, AAP represents a systemic failing that has challenged the international humanitarian community for decades.²

Individuals, groups and institutions in the humanitarian system have invested significantly to improve accountability.³ Notably the most recent sector wide efforts arose from the Grand Bargain in 2016 that saw us aiming for a so-called Participation Revolution within five years. As the curtains now close on the Grand Bargain, awareness and efforts have increased but tangible results are still elusive. There are persistent blockages between intention – as articulated in a multitude of policy and strategy documents – and implementation. There are further blockages between actions implemented and the desired impact, namely empowering people impacted by crisis to shape and influence response and recovery. Findings from the fifth independent review of the Grand Bargain in 2021 suggested ‘a consistent lack of political interest in participation, combined with a lack of incentives

to drive it forward.’⁴ And yet, despite the slow progress, we seem mainly to propose more of the same, when perhaps ‘a true accountability revolution would involve questioning whether we are playing the right game.’⁵

This practice paper provides a summary of the evaluations and reviews that have concluded that AAP is not having its intended impact. It goes on to provide possible explanations for this failure with a focus on the blockages between policy, practice and outcome, proposing that as a sector we are stuck in the weeds of AAP implementation without building in opportunities to consider the bigger picture of impact – and the changes in approach required. The paper concludes by proposing six ways to think about improved outcome-focused AAP. These are intended to support conversations and progress thinking that can support humanitarian leaders in finding a path out of the weeds.

"Evidence demonstrates that when organisations gather but don't use or respond to community members they become disinterested, disenfranchised, and often disengaged or frustrated with the organisation, its staff, programmes, and/or operations."⁶

1 <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/accountability-affected-populations-analytical-paper-whs-self-reporting-agenda-humanity>

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/apr/21/humanitarian-failing-crisis-un-aid-relief>

3 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2021/4/27/then-and-now-25-years-of-aid-accountability>

4 https://odi.org/en/insights/five-years-on-from-the-world-humanitarian-summit-lots-of-talk-no-revolution/?utm_content=bufferb1bde

5 <https://odihpn.org/blog/an-independent-commission-for-voices-in-crisis-changing-the-referee-instead-of-changing-the-game/>

6 CDA, Danish Red Cross and IFRC, All the Evidence We Need. It's Time to Act., 2019, page 6



What is accountability to affected people?

AAP is an active commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist.⁷

In international humanitarian action this has a number of key goals, including responsible use of power, active participation of crisis-affected people in the decisions that impact their lives; inclusion of diverse perspectives and different groups; effective two-way communication and sharing of critical information; and the establishment of feedback mechanisms that work. The foundation of AAP is human rights law and humanitarian principles that uphold the importance of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Over time, AAP has become concretely linked to other critical themes such as the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse⁸ but less so to broader systemic ones, such as localisation, resourcing, and measuring overall aid effectiveness.

Methodology

Acknowledging the consensus that accountability to affected people is failing to reach its stated objectives, this Practice Paper uses analysis of the research and evaluations of AAP to build a system-wide picture of the problem. It explains its findings in terms of how humanitarian organisations approach accountability: what ‘counts’ as AAP work, who does it, and where that work reaches the limits of its ability to change what humanitarian responses look like. This paper is based on review of published resources internal and external to the sector.

This study is part of the Humanitarian Horizons research program. Practice Papers are intended to focus on real time and relevant issues to produce short and digestible analysis to generate conversations for change. Practice papers are not academic research products, but instead aim to provide a balanced representation of knowledge and evidence. The paper represents a collaboration with AAP sector experts to co-author and was peer reviewed by experienced humanitarian practitioners.

This practice paper is guided by the following research questions:

- ▶ **Why is AAP not achieving the intended impact?**
- ▶ **What questions or approaches might help the sector move forward with the impact of accountability?**

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/apr/21/humanitarian-failing-crisis-un-aid-relief>

⁸ For example, the IASC AAP Commitments were revised in 2017 to reflect developments in sector including a focus on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse

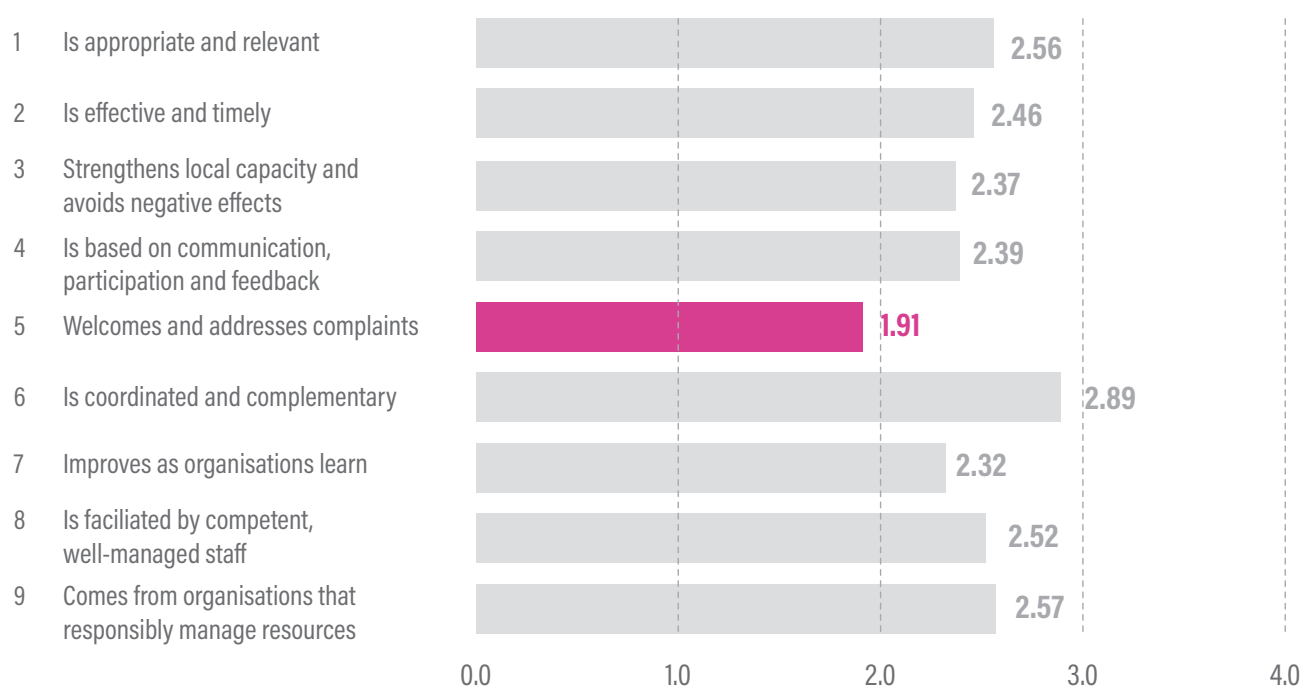
THE HARD TRUTH

There is widespread agreement in evaluations and other research that efforts to improve accountability to affected people are not having much of an impact.

The 2018 State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) report found that ‘while there are a number of initiatives and approaches that show potential, they have not yet delivered greater accountability or participation,’⁹ and that many humanitarians feared AAP was becoming a tick-the-box exercise.

The SOHS studies have indicated an increasing proportion of people are being consulted for needs assessments (see below), and performance on commitments 4 and 5 of the Core Humanitarian Standard (‘Communication and Participation’ and ‘Complaints are welcomed and addressed’) might be slowly improving, but the bar is painfully low. The latter was the lowest performing commitment across 56 CHS verifications in 2018 and 2019.¹⁰

Average Score by CHS Commitment



The scoring goes from 0 to 4, where ‘0’ indicates weakness that is so significant that the commitment cannot be met and ‘4’ indicates exemplary performance.

Source: Adapted from CHS Alliance, Humanitarian Accountability Report 2020: Are we making aid work better for people affected by crisis?, page 16

⁹ <https://sohs.alnap.org/help-library/the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system-2018-summary>

¹⁰ CHS Alliance, Humanitarian Accountability Report 2020: Are we making aid work better for people affected by Crisis?, 2020, page 18

Each year, evaluations of commitments under the Grand Bargain have pointed to a lack of progress on participation. The 2020 report was perhaps the most damning, the authors stating they could find ‘no evidence of a system-wide move towards a transformative approach that affords affected populations strategic influence over the aid they receive and how they receive it.’¹¹ An evaluation specific to urban responses concluded that accountability ‘has become an established principle of humanitarian action in recent years, but that it has not yet been sufficiently embedded in the culture and practice of the humanitarian system to make a meaningful impact on the manner in which the humanitarian programme cycle is managed’¹². A recent synthesis by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) found that squabbling over terminology and inadequacy of funding have repeatedly been a barrier to progress, and that ‘the participation of affected people has not been prioritised in the design and implementation of collective approaches.’¹³

Access to information is still highlighted as a concern.¹⁴ Information provision was stepped up with the COVID-19 pandemic, AAP terminology giving way temporarily to its health sector cousin Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE)¹⁵, described as ‘both a technical specialty and a foundational way of working to enable other technical pillars to achieve their goals.’¹⁶ But this appears to have been a missed opportunity to strengthen AAP more holistically. COVID-19 perception studies showed that while targeted RCCE efforts were working, and people felt very informed about the virus and how to protect themselves, they

still lacked information on available aid and services¹⁷ and were left feeling disempowered, as by and large their financial stability was more of a concern.

Studies document a focus on the collection of feedback with little evidence that it is informing programming¹⁸. Most agencies say they have feedback mechanisms and establishing or maintaining such mechanisms appears in most collective AAP plans. However, very few people believe aid organisations have acted on their opinions or feedback. The most recent SOHS report observed that reactive feedback mechanisms are ‘a limited form of participation’ and that ‘the views of crisis-affected people collected in these ways do not seem, in most cases, to have been influential in creating or changing humanitarian plans.’¹⁹ Efforts to increase information don’t equate to people being informed, and a multitude of feedback mechanisms don’t automatically mean feedback will be acted upon. This is evidenced time and again.²⁰ Across the board, many people who have gone to the effort of using a feedback system to lodge a question or complaint have never received a response²¹. The principles that underly putting people at the centre draw links between community feedback and aid relevance, and so it’s little wonder that recipients say year after year that aid is not meeting their needs, starkly demonstrated by how many sell their aid items or call for different modalities. The humanitarian response is simply not listening to them.

This global picture of effort without impact is also apparent at country level (see map below).

11 https://cdn.odj.org/media/documents/Report_Grand_Bargain_annual_independent_report_2020.pdf

12 <https://pubs.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/migrate/G04278.pdf>

13 https://cdn.odj.org/media/documents/Collective_approaches_to_communication_and_community_engagement_models_challenges.pdf

14 CHS Alliance, Humanitarian Accountability Report 2020: Are we making aid work better for people affected by Crisis?, 2020, page 44

15 <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-11/COVID-19%20Risk%20Communications%20and%20Community%20Engagement%20%28RCCE%29.pdf>

16 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), COVID-19 Risk Communications and Community Engagement (RCCE) and the Humanitarian System: Briefing Pack, page 13

17 <https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GTS-2020-annual-report.pdf>, pg 12-13

18 CHS Alliance, Humanitarian Accountability Report 2020: Are we making aid work better for people affected by Crisis?, 2020, page 44

19 ALNAP, State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) Report, 2018, page 157

20 <https://www.humanitarianvoiceindex.org/>

21 https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GTS_Chad_Information_EN.pdf

Country specific assessments and evaluations of AAP²²



Bangladesh: Lack of evidence that activities have 'enabled feedback from refugees to inform and influence the humanitarian response'.²³



Burkina Faso: 76% of community members surveyed do not know how to submit suggestions or complaints to aid providers.²⁴



Chad: People feel less comfortable reporting cases of mistreatment in 2020 than in 2018.²⁵



Iraq: Only 16% of aid recipients surveyed in 2020 felt that their opinions were considered by aid providers, a decrease from 33% in 2018. 69% said they were unaware of how to make suggestions or complaints about the aid or services they receive.²⁶



Ukraine: Only 35% of households felt sufficiently informed about humanitarian assistance and only 28% of community representatives knew what is expected from aid staff.²⁷



Somalia: 71% of people surveyed by REACH say that they didn't have enough information (2019).²⁸



Mozambique (Cyclone Idai response 2020): only 8% of community knew what assistance they were entitled to and only 19% understood how to provide feedback to aid organisations.²⁹

The most striking evidence though might be in the very lack of it. For all the lofty claims of participation, ownership and people at the centre, indications of whether that truly means anything – either when it comes to improvements in the community experience or changes in responders' behaviour – are hard to

come by. This has made it difficult to generate hard evidence on the much-touted link between improving AAP and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of responses, leaving AAP marooned in the 'nice-thing-to-do' category for many response leaders.

22 GTS surveys undertaken in Chad, the Central African Republic, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Somalia and Uganda show that generally people still do not know how to participate in the response and only 40% feel that their opinions are taken into account

23 CDAC Network, Real-time evaluation of Communicating with Communities Coordination: The Rohingya Response, July 2018 <https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/Rohingya%20BRT%20Report-spreads.pdf>

24 Ground Truth Solutions, Perception Indicators: Burkina Faso, November 2020 https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/GTS_BF_R1_One-Pager_EN.pdf

25 Ground Truth Solutions, To increase trust, first improve communication (Chad), May 2021 https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GTS_Chad_Information_EN.pdf

26 https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/GTS_Iraq_report_Jan-2020.pdf

27 Davies, S., Strengthening System-wide Accountability to Affected People (AAP): Report on Enhancing AAP in Ukraine, March 2020, pages 6 & 7

28 Amplifying Community voices in humanitarian action in Somalia (2019)

29 Inter-agency Humanitarian Evaluation, Evaluation of the Response to Cyclone Idai in Mozambique, July 2020, page 35

WHY ARE WE STUCK IN THE WEEDS?

The humanitarian sector identifies as strongly values based. Humanitarian actors are often characterised in terms of their ideas and objectives – saving lives, alleviating suffering – and the technical expertise through which they seek to fulfill those ambitions. The sociologist Monika Krause has shown, however, that what she calls ‘the logic of humanitarian relief’ is instead dominated by the procedures and techniques that managers and decision-makers in large organisations use to make their work across highly complicated emergency settings possible. This logic, she argues, shapes how resources are allocated and which activities take place, ‘independently of external interests but also relatively independently of beneficiaries’ needs and preferences.’³⁰

The ‘logic of humanitarian relief’ also inhibits the strengthening of accountability to affected people. What agencies specialise in affects their interpretation of priorities and limits the extent to which they are able to act on advice about needs and preferences. As Dan Maxwell et al wrote, ‘many factors contribute to how agencies select a response, and “response choice” does not always involve an evidence-based, analytical process.’³¹ Despite these realities, as a report on decolonising aid highlighted, ‘Many global north aid sector practitioners see themselves (and the wider sector) as operating neutrally, which is not only a fiction, it also reinforces the “white saviour” and “white gaze” mentality that has its roots in colonialism.’³²

We can see these dynamics at play in accountability failings. While policies and commitments continue to articulate the importance of AAP as a value and at the outcome level, the activities undertaken by agencies remain at the process level. Real

change and impact are rare. As AAP plans become specialised activities but lack sufficient buy-in, well-meaning attempts can evolve into tick-box exercises, because deeper engagement and tracking is challenging without funding and institutionally powerful leadership.

Standardisation leaves leaders without imagination

Concrete plans and frameworks to ‘put people at the centre’ are now more common than they used to be, but are more standardised and less revolutionary than their underlying principles would suggest. In the United Nations system, 32% of Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) have a collective AAP framework in place and 40% have a working group or coordination mechanism (these two may overlap)³³. Frameworks and organisational guidance range from quite vague³⁴ to more detailed³⁵, but tend to focus more on rolling out a long and predetermined set of community engagement activities than on tailoring accountability approaches to specific situations and populations.

This intense process orientation also sees the work relegated to a lower level than it should be, both within organisations and response-wide, unhelpfully separated from strategic programming, funding and security decision-making. Evaluations and reviews incessantly report that the lack of leadership buy-in is a barrier to true accountability.³⁶ A tendency to throw processes and guidance at the problem may leave humanitarian leaders feeling a lack of ownership over the end goal – remaining accountable to those they exist to serve. They add to the procedural logic of humanitarian relief

30 Monika Krause, *The Good Project: Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), page 4

31 Daniel Maxwell et al, *Response Analysis and Response Choice in Food Security Crises: A Roadmap*, HPN Network Paper 73 (2013), page 1

32 *Time to Decolonise Aid: Insights and Lessons from a Global Consultation*, second edition (London: Peace Direct, 2021)

33 OCHA, Note on IASC Coordination Structure at Country Level, March 2020

34 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Final_Yemen_HRP_2021.pdf

35 <https://www.who.int/health-cluster/resources/publications/AAP-tool/en/>

36 Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), Implementing collective accountability to affected populations, Policy Brief 78, October 2020

instead of sitting above it. It is the role of senior leaders in a response to ensure that actions being undertaken by teams and individuals collectively contribute to a bigger picture or impact-level result. Their experience and training should enable them to lead teams to higher-level results than individual staff members are able to either envision or generate momentum for in their program or project positions. Evidence points to the need for a set of coherent, interrelated actions on AAP³⁷ but without clear strategic vision or direction it is little wonder that staff and teams focus on the arena that they can influence: the activities.

Overspecialisation and the no-funding excuse

As attempts to put accountability principles into action have taken hold, a lack of staff capacity in AAP has often been cited as an impediment to improvement. Plagued with short term contracts, fickle budgets, pressure to report and lack of leadership investment, staff focus on things they can achieve. Defining how to 'do AAP' rather than how to 'be accountable' has seen the work driven forward largely by specialists within agencies, and not by leaders, which has resulted in a burst of very concrete but often disparate activities. Such specialists are on the back foot before they start. If a response plan has been built on a sector-based assessment of need and funding allocated accordingly, community priorities not driving design, then those tasked with accountability can only really tinker around the edges of what comes next.

This forces us down a path of developing, naming and re-naming new approaches and acronyms (CCE, CEA and CwC, RCCE³⁸, to name a few) and spending time generating and

debating their definitions. Countless workshops, discussions and even papers have sought to outline how slightly different angles on AAP interact and reinforce each other. HPG says that the proliferation of different terms and approaches has created a vicious cycle of confusion, where efforts required to clear up confusion lead to the creation of new definitions and approaches.³⁹ This exercise in itself creates more busy-work, seeing specialists task themselves with developing new check lists and tools to implement activities in each of these different-but-similar arenas.

Participation is hard to do well in the current system, because doing it well could upend the status quo. Information is more easily 'distributed' and as such has dominated efforts under an AAP banner. This has seen information delivered and extracted without much consideration of the communities, ironically in much the same supply-driven way that highlighted the need for better accountability in the first place.

This is linked to the common complaint that AAP activities are generally hard to resource. The inability to resource an effective accountability mechanism was identified in the DEC evaluation of the response to Cyclone Idai (2019), and a lack of dedicated funding was a barrier identified by HPG, who estimate that less than 1% of every response budget goes to accountability activities. This sort of equation may be problematic, as separating out AAP activities from other ones and seeking dedicated funding might slow progress. When AAP as a 'project' is seen to be competing with those aimed at saving lives, it will never be prioritised.

37 Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), Implementing collective accountability to affected populations, Policy Brief 78, October 2020

38 Communication and Community Engagement (CCE), Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA), Communications with Communities (CwC) and Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE)

39 Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), Implementing collective accountability to affected populations, Policy Brief 78, October 2020



Guidance abounds, but where are the outcomes?

According to the CHS alliance, 'there is no shortage of guidance on how to establish an effective mechanism,'⁴⁰ but it is easier to write guidance than it is to lift our focus to the intended impact and outcomes of such mechanisms. During the last year, global actors have shared a steady stream of additional guidance documents, frameworks and training materials. Almost none of this has been crafted by local actors let alone communities themselves. There is collective guidance, agency guidance, guidance by cluster, child-friendly guidance, guidance by theme and more. Guidance abounds on everything from coordinating messaging to communicating in appropriate languages and examples of agencies working on this are everywhere.

On a new portal that aims to be 'the go-to place for practitioners who strive to implement people-centered approaches' there is a new guidance note, checklist or tool almost weekly.⁴¹ On ReliefWeb there have been **over 200 new publications since the beginning of 2020** of tools, guidance, analysis or handbooks to assist organisations with AAP.⁴²

It is almost impossible, though, to find hard evidence of where guidance like this has been useful. When do we stop the focus on the guidance, toolkits and checklists to assess what all the activity has produced? We imagine that even a critical mass of agencies following all of this guidance in every response would not have the impact that we'd like to see, if not coupled with and informed by a focus on results.

Scoring good intentions

Attempts to assess the effectiveness of AAP have struggled to find a suitable anchor and have settled for evaluating good intentions. This was true of DFID's Payment by Results for UN agencies⁴³, introduced in 2017, which took evidence of collective AAP plans in Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) as a proxy indicator for evidence of response-wide accountability. In its scoring of Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC), UN OCHA also examines collective AAP in this way. In the Central African Republic, at the time of the publication of a brief⁴⁴ on the response-wide collective accountability approach, very few of the collective activities referenced were yet underway. Highlighting the circular logic that maintains the focus on process instead of outcome, an International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) and Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) study noted the difficulty of garnering leadership support for community engagement when real evidence is lacking. It argued that 'evaluating the impact of community participation is further disadvantaged when organisations do not measure engagement and participation in monitoring and evaluation systems.'⁴⁵

Many practice examples that find their way into AAP discussions are of course activities aimed at increasing participation, but this should not be sufficient. Projects seem to be quickly awarded a 'good practice' label, because they exist or comply with some guidance or other. Donors could have transformational power, but only if the project requirements are right. If the mere existence of a feedback and complaints mechanism can meet donor project requirements, then this could lead not just to more activities but confusing duplication, or heightened expectations of engagement that are not in fact followed up.

40 CHS Alliance, Humanitarian Accountability Report 2020: Are we making aid work better for people affected by Crisis?, 2020, page 51

41 <https://aap-inclusion-psea.alnap.org/>

42 <https://reliefweb.int> accessed 8th June 2021. Search terms: AAP; CwC; Feedback mechanisms; CEA; RCCE; PSEA AND guidance; analysis; tools

43 <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/uk-s-approach-funding-un-humanitarian-system>

44 https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/Collective_approaches_to_communication_and_community_engagement_in_the_Central_4G5CUQJ.pdf

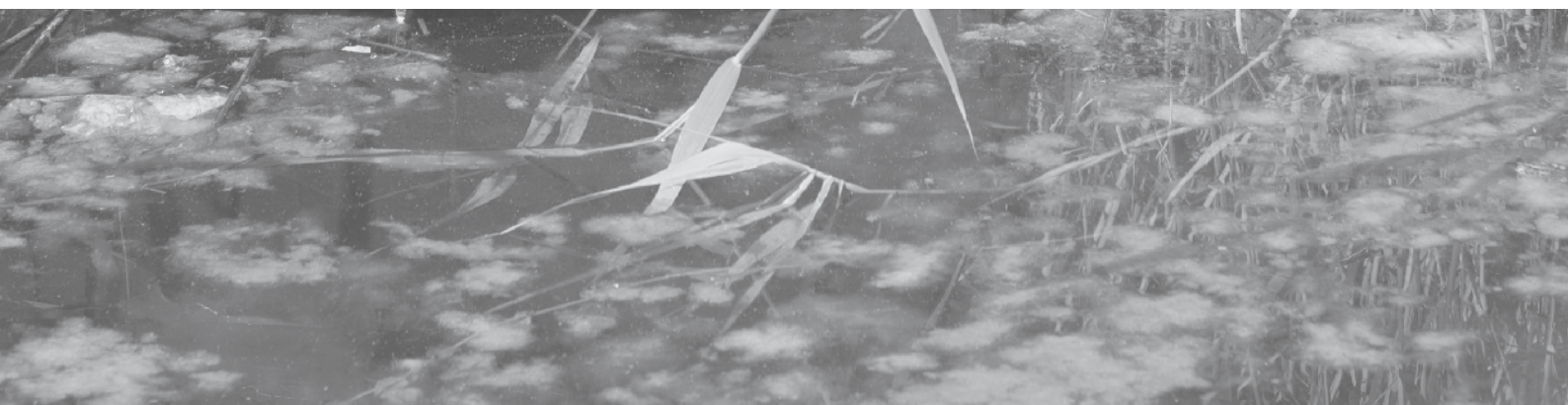
45 <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Report-All-the-Evidence-We-Need-CDA-FINAL.pdf>

Resigned to a broken system

Accountability to affected people is ripe for grandiose statements. It's easy to shout about shifting the power, throwing out the HPC and 'simply letting communities decide' or localising everything. It's much harder to chart a course to get there, amid ongoing and complex crises, under-funding and clunky global bureaucracies. Agencies and individuals seem reticent to share concrete ideas on how to bridge this gap, lest they fall short of revolutionary. But in reality, this leaves us right where we are, stuck in the perpetual motion of endless-activities-few-results, when a broader change management process is required.

These dynamics lead us to conclude that if there was more focus on **outcomes** when it came to accountability, leadership buy-in would increase and more fit-for-purpose models would be

established. There is enough guidance now that we could justify a pause in the production of any more, instead doubling down on efforts to work toward, and then critically evaluate, real life outcomes. This would also require some bravery from agencies in clearly articulating where efforts are not working, and we applaud those who have done so already. The authors predict that if the broader system and its donor catalysts shifted focus from activities to results, some of the nuts and bolts of AAP may more naturally fall into place and the reams of guidance could take a backseat. A focus on results instead of mechanisms, plans or principles might – finally – inspire sufficient leadership imagination and ownership, and take the conversation from the largely theoretical to something we can use.



A PATH OUT OF THE WEEDS

Affected communities are faced with – and often must live with – the weak outcomes of accountability efforts and the consequences of these failings for the quality of humanitarian responses. In 2012, the CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) study *Time to Listen*⁴⁶ analysed the views and experiences of over 6,000 people, finding that affected communities were rarely asked about the cumulative impacts of aid on their lives, as

distinct from specific project or programs. When they were, with striking consistency across the world, their answers showed that while specific projects could have positive impacts, 'they feel strongly that the cumulative negatives from aid are damaging and neither necessary nor inevitable.'

Nearly a decade later, feedback from affected people shows that aid is still not conducive to feelings of resilience. Those who hold power in

46 Mary B. Anderson, Dayna Brown and Isabella Jean, *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid* (2012)

the humanitarian system have not done enough to ensure that these preventable, negative impacts are addressed. As Hugo Slim wrote, 'Good humanitarian action is a social encounter between two forms of agency: the human agency of those affected and the humanitarian agency of those trying to help them. Together, they must share a diagnosis of the situation and generate appropriate solutions which respect people's reality, not only their humanity.'⁴⁷ This paper shows that this vision of a humanitarian action as a collaborative project is not yet reflected in practice. But how can we do better? It is essential that at all levels – from individuals to leaders, operational organisations to donors – the sector learns to act on the bigger picture.

CHANGING OUR APPROACH TO FOCUS ON OUTCOMES

Rather than creating new mechanisms in the hope that these will have impact where others have failed, we believe that a different approach is needed – one that is not about simply doing more, but which allows us to acknowledge that an accountable response requires a broader vision. From this honest admission it may be possible to get closer to the people-centred aid that the sector is aiming for. We propose six ways to think about improved outcome focused AAP that are intended to help humanitarian leaders find a path out of the weeds. These are intended to support conversations and progress thinking.

1. Let people, not process, be your guide.

Humanitarian leaders should be fierce advocates for those they exist to assist, not coordinators of largely predetermined activities. This means first listening, and facilitating a humanitarian approach that is responsive and relevant. Being guided by affected people will require user-centred approaches that embrace ambiguity, meaning evidence not of achieving static AAP-themed activities in log-frames but of responsiveness to changing community

priorities. Donors have a role to play – and a way to go – in making funding truly flexible and rewarding both responsive programming and honest reporting, but stronger examples from response management will help speed this up.

There tends to be a correlation between AAP effectiveness and community proximity, which is why some of the most concrete 'good practice' examples can be found in camp management or local government. Framing AAP approaches as an attempt to narrow the proximity gap, no matter where you sit, may provide inspiration for increasing representation, opening communications channels and supporting locally-trusted systems.

2. Structure your work to be accountable, not to 'do accountability'.

An accountable response challenges leaders to make tough and unpopular decisions in line with community priorities. It means understanding what is happening locally, and tailoring approaches accordingly. Every humanitarian leader needs to have a clear sense of what it looks like to be properly accountable to specific people, in a specific place, at a specific time, and shouldn't launch AAP activities unless they're realistic about what being accountable will mean for implementation.

This is about adaptive management. It might mean throwing out the AAP checklists, and doing something more intuitive. It requires better understanding existing community dynamics and supporting them in the background. It might require making big changes to planned activities – listening to affected people not just on *how* things are done, but whether they're even the right things.

It might also mean *not* doing things-not setting up AAP working groups in the absence of strategy and leadership commitment, not making new guidance unless you have tried existing guidance and know why it didn't work, or not collecting data until you are committed to acting upon it. It also means not hiring an

47 <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2020/02/20/people-power-humanitarian-action/>

AAP specialist or bringing in a consultant for a few months unless the response is structured to make their work meaningful. Any dedicated accountability staff should be considered a helpful conduit between diverse communities and busy leaders, not the people ultimately responsible for making it all successful.

3. Think bigger. Localise your assessment process and take cash programming seriously.

Evidence tells us that AAP activities are on the increase while community satisfaction is not. This points to a need to think more holistically about the elements of an accountable response. Rather than piling so-called AAP questions into already gargantuan question lists for needs assessments, think how you can approach needs analysis with more focus on community priorities and existing local activities, and less on what each sector thinks they need to know. This should set you on a smoother path to course correction based on feedback as the response progresses.

Evidence also points to an increasing community preference for cash. Take this seriously. If communities in a given location are consistently saying they need cash, and humanitarians consistently give them food or other items that they are forced to on-sell in an attempt to buy what they need, then there's an accountability gap that no number of focus groups or surveys or hotlines will fix.

4. Measure results and be honest about what worked and what didn't.

Understanding the impact of efforts to improve accountability to affected people is essential to the success of those efforts. Too often, we neglect this task or rely on selective self-reporting of impact, narrowly defined. Rarely do we acknowledge the collective and cumulative impacts that affected people experience when dealing with multiple humanitarian actors and their different projects over time. Self reports mistake the existence of information channels for the exchange of knowledge, or the existence

of a feedback mechanism for a culture of participation.

Changing this culture means not going ahead with AAP activities unless there are ways to measure how people are experiencing them. It means not making a new plan for collective accountability unless you know whether the preceding one made a difference to affected people – and why. It means constantly adapting to community experience data. It means not examining your current project in isolation but instead trying to understand the big picture as well as your place in it. And it means sharing the results – the good, bad and ugly – with other practitioners. Transparency as a critical element of accountability has slowly disappeared from the AAP discussion as collective mechanisms have scaled up. It's time to bring it back.

5. Diagnose specific participation weaknesses and commit to fixing them.

Accountability plans are helpful if they are specific. We need to use community feedback to hone in on elements that warrant improvement. A general aspiration for 'better AAP' or 'greater accountability' isn't enough. To this end, and linked to the previous point, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) processes should prioritise community feedback, not asking whether feedback mechanisms exist but instead seeking evidence of how organisations are listening; not asking who has participated in consultations but instead asking whether people feel included and to what extent; and not asking what information has been given but instead asking people on the receiving end whether they understand and know how to act on that knowledge. Based on this, specific but ambitious goals should be prioritised, communicated and plans made to meet them. Be realistic about the fact that you won't fix everything and prioritise what communities tell you is most important. Don't be scared to report slow progress – evidence of tangible change, no matter how slow, should trump hyperbole if we are ever to bridge the huge gap between the AAP weeds (endless activities) and the clouds (empty idealistic rhetoric).

6. Be an outlier and look to a different future.

This paper has argued that following guidance and checklists to the letter will likely not create systemic change, that a narrow, cookie-cutter definition of AAP won't work and that becoming truly accountable will require systemic, brave and often unpopular shifts. The humanitarian sector, driven by a sense of urgency and immediacy, is beset by 'present bias', a tendency to focus on today rather than think about what tomorrow might bring. With a future that feels largely outside our sphere of influence, change is rare because it will most often feel more important to do things in a familiar way *for now*. But this topic requires mould breaking, a longer-term view and a bit of imagination. It requires setting new precedents. The *time to listen* report was ten years ago and if the cycle isn't broken, ten years from now we'll find ourselves here again. Charting a new course within a system not structured for flexibility is not for the faint of heart. But enough humanitarian leaders recognising the full weight of that and becoming advocates for change might see us climb closer to our sky-high claims of accountability to affected people, bridging the gap between rhetoric and reality.

